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The CIA's Use of American Reporters

Should an American newspaperman ever report back his findings to the Central Intelligence Agency?

The reverse happens all the time: CIA men in American embassies overseas — the open ones, that is — are among the best information sources available to correspondents about developments in the countries where they are stationed.

They are well informed and particularly useful in providing background to a correspondent who may be in a country for only a short time.

Good journalists tap this knowledge, but doublecheck their information, as they would with any other source, and generally find it reliable.

But, what about journalists giving back information in return?

"Never for money" was the guideline suggested here two years ago by three foreign correspondents attending a University of Hawaii Round Table on Asian News, sponsored by the Gannett Fellowship Program.

Keyes Beech, now of the Los Angeles Times; Dennis Bloodworth of the London Observer; and Richard Halloran of the New York Times, all said they talk to intelligence agents overseas, even exchange information with them, but would consider it prostitution to accept paid CIA assignments.

Beech termed his relations with overseas agents "mutually beneficial."

All of this bears on a new flap among journalists over an amendment to the 1976 CIA policy that it would not use full-time or part-time U.S. journalists, paid or unpaid, for intelligence activities.

At the end of 1977, the new CIA director, Stansfield Turner, amended this policy to permit exceptions with the specific approval of the CIA director.

Under this amendment, he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors, three assignments for newsmen were approved by him, but never carried out because of changed circumstances.

Turner defended the policy. He said he sees no harm in a newsman helping his government secure important information, so long as he remains ethical and honest in what he reports to his journalistic audience.

President Carter later backed Turner and indicated the exceptions also had been cleared with him.

A number of American newspapers tend to fear any contact with the CIA will tarnish their reputation for integrity and independence.

The facts are that contacts always have been frequent, and that no matter what we say or do, most foreigners will be suspicious anyway that newsmen are sometimes "spies."

This will displease some of our journalistic brethren but we think the allowance of exceptions specifically approved at the highest levels of government is reasonable if frugally exercised.

The losses to journalism will hardly be as great as alleged. The gain to the nation presumably could be significant or else the exception shouldn't be approved.

Ethical writing and reporting still remains the responsibility of each correspondent and his editors.